

How James Brown Helped Introduce Chadwick Boseman to Black Panther

I found my 2013 interview with the late actor and some connective tissue between icons

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I met Chadwick Boseman for the first and last time on Dec. 12, 2013. We were in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on the set of *Get on Up*, the James Brown biopic in which he starred. I was on assignment for *Vibe* magazine. On that particular day, Boseman was shooting a scene of the now-enshrined moment in music history where James Brown & The Famous Flames scorched the T.A.M.I. show in 1964 (rumored to be fueled by JB's anger at being billed beneath the Rolling Stones).

I sat on set for a couple hours and marveled at Boseman. Of course, I'd already seen him portray the great Jackie Robinson earlier that year in *42*. It was clear that he could appear athletic on screen. But just how athletic he actually was raised my brows. I wasn't aware of his background in dance. He had the happiest of feet. His ankles mirrored Brown's patented swivel. I eagerly awaited the buoyant split and the man delivered. That

scene was shot a dozen times that afternoon, and never once did it lose freshness.

When I was finally able to sit down with Chadwick, James Brown appeared instead. Earlier that day, everyone — from the film's hairdresser to cast members — informed me that it was normal for Chadwick to remain in character for entire shoot days. Some days would stretch as long as 14 hours. I assumed an interview would inspire a character break. I was wrong, yet grateful. Witnessing Chadwick embody the physicality of James Brown was one thing. Observing JB speak to me through the rising actor was an experience I never anticipated. He dragged words, mashed or swallowed syllables eerily like *The Godfather*. When making a point excitedly, he'd spit rapidly, at times incomprehensibly.

In *Get on Up*, James Brown's manager and best friend Ben Bart was depicted by the legendary Dan Akroyd. He called Chadwick's portrayal of his buddy "dead on." (For those too young or forgetful, Akroyd met Brown on the set of the 1980 film *The Blues Brothers* and then put him in 1983's *Dr. Detroit*.) "He's got the voice, the walk, the mannerisms, the attitude, the paranoia," said Akroyd of Chadwick on set. "I knew James very well and Chadwick has him nailed. The kid's done his homework."

Eventually, about a third of the way into our interview, Chadwick arrived, yet I could still hear James and South Carolina. For example, "then" stayed "den." The

remainder of the interview convinced me of two things: First, Boseman wasn't an actor who simply took on roles. He was a thespian who possessed himself with the greats he aimed to emulate. As someone quite familiar with West African religious practices, I perked up as Chadwick described a dramatic practice that was equally Eastern spiritual.

"Every day as an actor, you get up in the morning and you have a certain ritual that you go through," said Boseman. "You allow the character into you each day. You allow the character to introduce himself. You wake up in your skin, but you can't just put on the skin of the character without seducing it a little bit."

Listening back to this interview, it began to crystallize that Chadwick — very similar to Coltrane and Gandhi and Nipsey — was more spirit than human. It explains why and how he could assume the ghosts of greats like Thurgood Marshall and Chaka Zulu with such potency.

My second realization was that there wasn't a historical figure closer to Boseman's spirit than James Brown. Like Chadwick, the man who literally rose from dirt to become a rhythm revolutionary was born in South Carolina. Both were pugilists. Brown's innate talent as a dancer assisted his boxing lessons and vice versa. Chadwick wouldn't reveal the specific form of combat that he studied ("I ain't gonna tell you that. You gonna get me broke out here," he said with a laugh), but years later, while viewing the

fighting scenes in *Black Panther*, I knew I was watching Chadwick more than T'Challa.

There were "gifts" Chadwick received from James Brown's character that he didn't want to shed once production had concluded. Today, my inclination is that those pieces of JB helped him fit into that Wakanda crown. "There's an audacity and confidence and self worth [to James]," he said. "Almost like Muhammad Ali. [James] will have the announcer go through a list of his names from The Godfather of Soul on, but if nobody else did it, he would do it himself. I wouldn't necessarily hold onto all of him, but I would like to hold onto that swagger and pull it out when I need it."

That point in time would come when he gave us the greatest Black superhero to ever be imagined (or in T'Challa's case, reimagined). This during the term of a POTUS who worked most tenaciously for White supremacy. Everything about *Black Panther* was anti-establishment. Young James was the same — from his unapologetic business demands during highly oppressive times for Black musicians to penning "Say It Loud — I'm Black and I'm Proud."

"There are so many things I've learned by walking in [James'] shoes that you wouldn't get by just listening to his music or reading his books," said Boseman. "There's a certain drive for perfection and holding people accountable. I just think he's a person who expected the

best out of everybody and he was like, I'm gonna make the rules myself. You have to live under this domain. He saw himself as a king in that right."

Sound familiar?